

PLOUGH

Much as with the donkeys, Gainsborough defines the form of the plough largely through its relationship to the landscape. The warm light illuminating the top wooden crossbar of the plough stands out against the darker trees, while the dark brown wheels contrast with the light yellow grasses. The artist also used complementary colours to draw attention to the different qualities of light, with the warm orange highlights on various parts of the plough contrasting with the cooler blue highlights on the rims of the wheels.

This part of the painting was particularly challenging to copy in the reconstruction because of the way that Gainsborough expertly manipulated the consistency and texture of the paint to mimic wood grain in the plough.

BELOW: *Original painting and reconstruction (detail)*

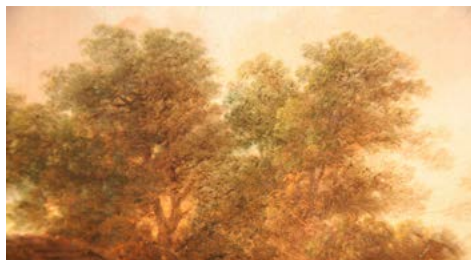


TREES

The thick texture of the dark brown dabs of paint in the trees of *Peasant and Donkeys* plays a significant role in creating the illusion of leaves. Close study of this area indicated that Gainsborough did not use a brush to apply these touches of paint: instead, he must have used another tool in a less controlled way, imparting a randomized, organic quality to the marks.

The reconstruction attempts to replicate this effect. Stand oil – a concentrated form of linseed oil – was mixed with pigment to obtain a particularly viscous paint consistency. After testing a number of different implements, lightly daubing the paint onto the painting using a coarse cloth was found to most successfully imitate Gainsborough's paint application. Then, a fine brush was used to slightly manipulate the thick deposits of paint to modify the shapes. As a result of this principally uncontrolled method of paint application, the reconstruction does not reproduce the exact same markings as in *Peasant and Donkeys* but instead tries to emulate the impression Gainsborough achieved.

BELOW: *Original painting and reconstruction (detail)*



THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH:
METHODS OF MAKING

Reconstruction of Gainsborough's *Peasant and Donkeys*

KARI RAYNER, SEPTEMBER 2016

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PAUL MELLON
CENTRE



UNIVERSITY OF
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Hamilton Kerr Institute

The purpose of this reconstruction, carried out by Kari Rayner at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, was to gain firsthand experience emulating Gainsborough's painting technique. This type of study results in an increased understanding of the material aspects of a work of art and can provide unforeseen insights into the artist's processes, interests, and influences. Unlike a replica, which reproduces a work in full, a reconstruction leaves the canvas support, priming, and underlayers of paint exposed so that the method of creation is visible to the viewer. This particular painting was an ideal candidate for reconstruction due to its excellent condition: treatment in the spring of 2016 ensured that discoloured varnish and past restorations did not significantly affect the appearance of the work.

DURING TREATMENT

The painting was treated at the Hamilton Kerr Institute of the Fitzwilliam Museum at the University of Cambridge in March 2016. When the work arrived, there was a thick, yellow varnish layer over the surface. This photograph shows the painting mid-treatment, with the varnish largely removed from the left side. Full varnish removal beneficially transformed the painting's appearance, restoring the cool, atmospheric colours of the sky and trees, and reestablishing the spatial depth of the landscape.

BELOW: Original painting during treatment and the infrared reflectograph



During the process of reproducing *Peasants and Donkeys*, the painting's minutest details were scrutinized. It soon became apparent that this was a highly experimental work in Gainsborough's Suffolk period. He was clearly learning during the process of its execution, adjusting colours and tonal relationships as he painted. Playing with the recession of space and varying the level of detail, he expertly guides the viewer's eye through the work: his development of the composition is truly visionary. The observation of such details, facilitated by the creation of this reproduction, has led to an increased appreciation of Gainsborough's skill as an artist at this formative early stage in his career.

INFRARED REFLECTOGRAPH

In preparation for painting, artists often plan out the composition by drawing it onto the canvas. This "underdrawing" beneath the paint can be revealed using infrared reflectography, which is particularly useful for detecting carbon-containing materials such as charcoal, graphite, or black paint.

In this painting, Gainsborough used hardly any preparatory underdrawing. Instead, as can be seen in the infrared reflectograph, he seems to have sparingly applied a few marks in black paint to indicate the placement of the peasant, animals, and major compositional elements. Using these indications, he then painted the background around the figures, "leaving them in reserve."

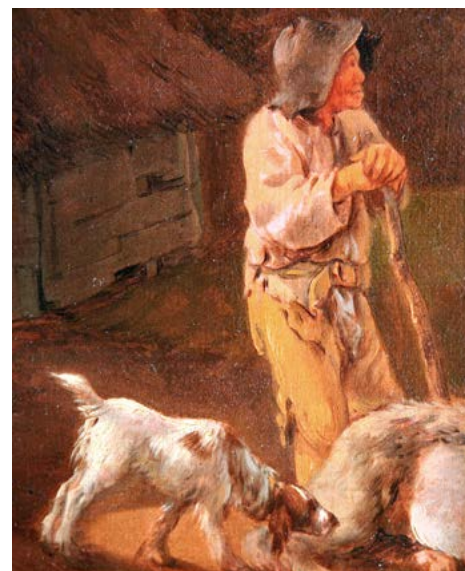
It is also possible in the infrared reflectograph to study Gainsborough's painting technique. For example, the dark brushstrokes to the left of the dog clearly show the brush size and consistency of the paint Gainsborough used in this area.



PEASANT AND DOG

Gainsborough's method of applying a few indications for the outlines of the figure and animals and then leaving them in reserve was mirrored in the reconstruction. The peasant and dog were not brought to completion in the reconstruction to show what *Peasant and Donkeys* might have looked like at this stage.

BELOW: Original painting and reconstruction (detail)



DONKEYS

Gainsborough plays with the viewer's perception brilliantly in the execution of the donkeys. In the reconstruction, the donkey in front was left with the underlayers of paint exposed, while the second donkey behind it was brought to a final finish. These different levels of completion emphasise the way, as in the finished painting, that the forms of the donkeys are defined by each other and their relationships to the background. Looking closely at the foremost donkey in the painting, the animal's rear end does not have a definitive outline and instead recedes amorously into the grass of the landscape – it is impossible to discern where the shape of the donkey ends and begins. Gainsborough relies upon the viewer to mentally complete the animal's form.

BELOW: Original painting and reconstruction (detail)

